

The fisheries memorial in Vík í Mýrdal

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► INGO HEIDBRINK

The Fisheries Memorial in Vík í Mýrdal

Between 1898 and 1952 more than eighty German trawlers were lost during fishing operations off Iceland. Most of these ships stranded on the southeastern coast of Iceland on the black sand-shores between Vík and Ingolfshöfði or on the cliffs of the southwestern coast. Others sank on the fishing-grounds and twenty-five were never accounted for. Altogether some one thousand fishermen lost their lives on board German trawlers operating off Iceland. The Iceland fishery was one of the most dangerous activities in the whole history of German deep-sea fishing.

Just these simple figures would be reason enough to commemorate those fishermen who lost their lives near the island in the far North Atlantic. But the story would not be complete without mentioning those who survived such a stranding or any other kind of accident, and survival often – or nearly always – depended on the support of local people on the south coast of Iceland. Therefore it was clear that any memorial erected in connection with these events should take both aspects into account, the commemoration of the fishermen as well as the gratitude to the Icelanders who risked their own lives during rescue operations.

But what is the story behind the memorial?

Since 1997 a volunteer study group on “fisheries history” has worked in close connection with the Department of Fisheries History at the German Maritime Museum. Particularly the early history of German deep-sea trawling was a focus of the joint research and Iceland was therefore naturally one of the most relevant topics. While reviewing the documents in the archives, a member of the study group found a picture that seemed to have been misplaced in the archive of trawling company: a group of men on horseback in front of an Icelandic shop in the first decade



Members of the
Working Group
“Fisheries Memorial”.

The Museum in Vík í Mýrdal.



of the 20th century. But a second view clarified the situation. The men on the horses were the crew of the lost German trawler WÜRTEMBERG and their Icelandic rescuers. The interest in further research was born.

During the following period, members of the study group as well as the Department of Fisheries History concentrated research on losses of trawlers and other kind of accidents. Hilda Peters, a retired manager of the fishing company NORDSEE, became a real expert on nearly every accident that happened in the early days of German fishing operations off Iceland. And she reactivated her former professional contacts to Iceland. Nearly every newly rediscovered story of a German trawler lost off Iceland was a story of dramatic rescue action entailing the risk of death for both the shipwrecked crew members and their Icelandic helpers. When it became clear how many ships had been lost and how many people had drowned, the idea of a memorial was born. Particularly the fact that there were no memorials to the crew members of German trawlers on Icelandic graveyards – although there are several for crew members of British or French trawlers – lent support to the idea.



The Fisheries Memorial after its opening on Sept. 15th, 2002.



Close-up of the memorial stone.

Then, in the process of research in the Icelandic National Archives, a contact arose with an Icelandic volunteer group operating the local museum in Vík í Mýrdal, a small village at the southern shore of Iceland and right in the centre of the area in which most trawlers were lost. The discussion of general facts concerning German-Icelandic fisheries history led easily to talk about the idea of a memorial.

At the beginning of 2001, the study group "Fisheries History" decided to start with the realization of the project and the Robert Bosch Foundation agreed to cover the costs of the voluntary work (communication, travel, etc.). The costs for the monument itself were covered only by donations from private persons, companies and institutions of the fishing industry. The design of the monument was a result of the study group itself and called for the use of Northern German granite as a symbol of the stranded trawlers and Icelandic basalts to symbolize the Icelandic rescuers.

In the summer of 2002 the granite was shipped to Iceland and on Sept. 15th the opening ceremony took place in Vík í Mýrdal. The Icelandic consul in Bremerhaven, Reinhard Meiners, supported the project from the time of its inception and managed to convince the Icelandic prime minister, Davíð Oddsson, to become the patron of the memorial.